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DE RUEHIHL #0039/01 0972040
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FM REO HILLAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1060
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD IMMEDIATE 0912
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 1124

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 HILLAH 000039

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/6/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SECURITY SITUATION IN KARBALA: MALIKI - 1 SADR - 0

REF: HILLAH 00034

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CLASSIFIED BY: Donald J. Cooke, Team Leader, PRT KARBALA, DoS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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11. (U) This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable

12. (C) SUMMARY: Maliki and his supporters in the provincial government were the clear winners in the latest clashes between insurgents and the government in Karbala. Government forces continued effective operations against JAM that had started before the government's moves into Basra and Baghdad. The unique political make-up of the province and recent events, including the recent bombing in Karbala City, combined with effective action by the government increased government support and decreased sympathy for the militants. These events only emphasize the importance of moving a fully-staffed PRT into Karbala Province as soon as feasible. END SUMMARY

13. (C) Karbala is a PIC province with a Dawa governor (Dr. Aqueel Khazali). Security forces are effective and led by the politically reliable commander of the Karbala Operations Center, Iraqi Police Maj. Gen. Ra'ad. Both the governor and Ra'ad have ties to and the support of PM Maliki, in what the PM tends to think of as his "home" province. The Provincial Council, chaired by the nominally-independent Yassiry, is divided among a number of parties where no one group appears to have effective control. Home to the Hussein Shrine, the province, while not off-limits to violence, has not seen widespread insurgent action since the security crackdown during Shabaniyah last August. One reason for the lower level of activity is the understanding by most insurgents that popular support for them could wane if they cause trouble in the Holy Province. PRT Karbala noticed a large populace backlash against militias after Shabaniyah which has made it difficult for militia operatives to work in the province.

14. (C) The province's Emergency Response Unit (ERU) is led by recently-promoted Lt. Col. Ali. In the run-up to the government's assaults in Baghdad and Basra, Ali has been spearheading a concerted effort against insurgents and Special Group (SG). A measure of Ali's effectiveness in the previous year is that he has been the subject of at least one, and possibly two, assassination attempts in the last month. The SGC (and Sadrists in general) resent Ali's actions; they consider them a violation of the cease-fire with the government and believe (perhaps correctly) they are politically motivated in

the run-up to October elections. In that vein, Karbala Provincial Government officials do not publicly refer to the insurgents as Sadrists, JAM or even militias, using less political terms like gunmen, armed groups or assassins. We believe this to be a clear attempt to depoliticize, or at least give the appearance of depoliticizing, actions against militias.

In private, these same officials make no secret of their belief that these insurgents are supporters of or sympathizers with Sadr.

15. (S) A further part of the backdrop occurred on March 17, when a bomb exploded in a cafi near the Hussein Shrine, killing over 50 people and wounding scores more. While various scenarios have been put forth (reftel), the one undisputed conclusion is that this bombing was condemned by all and was a blow to Sadrist interests in the province. It is noteworthy that no one has claimed "credit" for the blast and most people blame Sadrist sympathizers. Comment: MG Ra'ad arrested 100 people after the bombing and cases against 10 will apparently move forward. End Comment.

16. (S) MG Ra'ad had, in fact, used the backdrop of the bombing to press libel charges against his nemesis, Abdul - Hadi Al-Mohammadawi, OMS director in its Karbala office. At the time of the assaults in Baghdad and Basrah, MG Ra'ad claims he had a request in to the Ministry of the Interior for an additional 1500 police in order to arrest Abdul - Hadi Al-Mohammadawi. Instead of getting his 1500 police reinforcements, MG Ra'ad and LTC Ali were ordered to Basra with 1500 police and 450 Iraqi Army soldiers to reinforce government operations there. (MG Ra'ad has subsequently tried to execute the warrant, but Mohammadawi has fled to Najaf).

17. (S) Feeling intensely frustrated at the state of events, and seeing MG Ra'ad and LTC Ali's departure as an opportunity, JAM/SGC lost no time taking advantage of Sadr's purported statement legitimizing actions "in self-defense" and raising the level of violence and attacks against government targets. While they may have been part of a larger JAM effort, we believe these

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actions were taken locally without central orchestration and were largely ineffective. In fact, what the JAM/SGC failed to count on was the decisive action taken by acting KOC commander Emad in cordoning off and dealing with JAM/SGC neighborhoods. The police used curfews, cordons and arrests to disrupt insurgent action. The pace of IP actions picked up after the return of MG Ra'ad, LTC Ali and their 1500 men.

18. (S) In one action north of Karbala city in the town of Hussaniyah, close to the 4/8 IA Infantry Division, insurgents being driven out of Karbala attacked a police checkpoint with small arms fire. IA forces quickly reinforced the checkpoint and defeated the attackers. The IA then remained the rest of the night with the IP officers to secure the check point and to show joint cooperation. IA officers described this as a successful practical test of joint exercises that they had undertaken with the IP. The credit for this IA/IP interactivity goes to the 840 MiTT team who has worked hard to integrate many of the command functions and operations. It was very clear at the onset that this type of integration training has paid. As far as we can determine, there were no defections from the ISF and all IP checkpoints held.

19. (C) Provincial officials were acutely concerned that transportation disruptions and curfews were limiting normal life and preventing people from obtaining access to food, etc. They were concerned they would pay a political price for the hardships. The prevailing public attitude, however, especially in the city center and northern parts of the province, was that the JAM/SGC and Sadrist sympathizers were responsible for the problems and that it was time for the government to take action against them. The fact that the ISF was seen as effective in dealing with these groups only enhanced support for the government. While we have heard that many people believe they lost some of their freedoms with respect to lack of movements

and curfew, almost all welcomed the crackdown.

¶10. (S) Christened by MG Ra'ad as Operation Knight's Defense (Playing off the name used in Basrah Operation), the IP ran cordon and search operations concentrating in the southern neighborhoods of Karbala City where insurgent activity was most prevalent. While lacking some of the finesse that we would associate with coalition forces, ISF was, nonetheless, effective. The one criticism of the operation that was brought to our attention was the belief that MG Ra'ad's ISF was not showing sufficient concern for human rights. We understand that this criticism of MG Ra'ad has become a point of contention between PM Maliki, Governor Aqueel and MG Ra'ad. Apparently feeling substantial political heat, the PM has asked Gov. Aqueel to intervene with MG Ra'ad so that he will only arrest people who have committed crimes or who take up arms against the ISF. Gov. Aqueel responded that MG Ra'ad was refusing to take direction from him and that Maliki would have to approach him directly. Comment: The relation between Ra'ad and Aqueel has been strained, both have national ambitions. For the time being they need each other and we expect this rift to be temporary. End Comment.

¶11. (S) In a discussion of the security situation with the Karbala Team Leader, PC Chair Yassiry raised the issue of human rights. Without mentioning any names, he came down clearly on the side of MG Ra'ad saying that in the fight against terrorists, accusations of human rights abuses were to be expected. PCC Yassiry also said that he had been touring the province with the press and that the public supported the ISF's actions against the insurgents. He also made a disparaging comparison with Najaf Province, where government officials were in discussion with Sadrists, saying that in Karbala, "We don't negotiate with terrorists." When asked about Iranian influence, PCC Yassiry twice deflected the question saying that all of Iraq's neighbors are interfering in Iraq to promote their own interests.

¶12. Comment: In the final analysis, the recent government actions in Basra and Baghdad gave both the Karbala Provincial Government and local Sadrists an opportunity to demonstrate their strength. In Karbala, this first round goes to the government. The Sadrists demonstrated that they can cause disruptions, but little more. The government intensified harassment and raids against insurgents. We expect those raids to continue. IP and IA forces demonstrated over the last year that they can work together under the command of the Karbala Operations Center. Given the sphere of influence and projection of security forces throughout Karbala city and surrounding areas we believe the Karbala "Green Zone" has expanded. Government supporters control the shrines and the fees that are collected there. There are indications that the public has been traumatized by the ISF's heavy handed tactics. ISF tactics of mass arrests, curfews, and neighborhood raids while effective are not without substantial political and economic cost. Public

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fear that future OMS incitements could lead to a repeat of those ISF tactics might well provide OMS with a degree of leverage in future dealings with PM Maliki and even elicit a degree of sympathy for non-violent OMS followers that could benefit their efforts in the upcoming provincial elections. Round two is the fight for hearts and minds and superior military power does not guarantee success. It will be interesting to see if ISF and provincial officials are capable of broader counter-insurgency strategy.

¶13. (C) Comment Continued: The current situation provided a timely opportunity for the Karbala PRT. Continued support for the government depends on our support for economic development and good governance. We will also be working to increase professionalism and respect for the rule of law in the ISF. This may be our chance to open a dialogue with more moderate Sadr supporters. The PRT looks forward to pushing out into the province to continue this important work. End Comment. COOKE